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## STUDENT REPORT

A DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF  
THE SIEGES OF  
DIEN BIEN PHU AND KHE SANH

MAJOR ROGER L. PURCELL 86-2060

*"insights into tomorrow"*

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**REPORT NUMBER** 86-2060

**TITLE** A DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE SIEGES OF  
DIEN BIEN PHU AND KHE SANH

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Submitted to the faculty in partial fulfillment of  
requirements for graduation.

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE  
AIR UNIVERSITY  
MAXWELL AFB, AL 36112

UNCLASSIFIED

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

AD-A166594

## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION <b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>			1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS		
2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY			3. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT		
2b. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE			<b>STATEMENT "A"</b> <b>Approved for public release;</b> <b>unlimited distribution</b>		
4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)  86-2060					
5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)					
6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION  ACSC/EDCC		6b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)		7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION	
6c. ADDRESS (City, State and ZIP Code)  Maxwell AFB AL 36112-5542				7b. ADDRESS (City, State and ZIP Code)	
8a. NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION		8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)		9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER	
8c. ADDRESS (City, State and ZIP Code)				10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NOS.	
				PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.
				TASK NO.	WORK UNIT NO.
11. TITLE (Include Security Classification) <b>A DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE</b>					
12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) Purcell, Roger L., Major, USAF					
13a. TYPE OF REPORT		13b. TIME COVERED FROM _____ TO _____		14. DATE OF REPORT (Yr., Mo., Day) 1986 April	
				15. PAGE COUNT 28	
16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION  ITEM 11: SIEGES OF DIEN BIEN PHU AND KHE SANH					
17. COSATI CODES			18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB. GR.			
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) This paper includes a description and analysis of the sieges of Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh. It begins with a summary of General Vo Nguyen Giap. General Giap was the Vietminh commander at Dien Bien Phu and the North Vietnamese commander at Khe Sanh. Chapter Three explains why the siege of Dien Bien Phu took place. Chapter Four describes the siege and gives reasons for the French failure. Chapters Five and Six follow the same format in showing why the United States was successful at Khe Sanh. The final chapter consists of recommendations from lessons learned from both sieges.					
20. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT  UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS <input type="checkbox"/>				21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION  UNCLASSIFIED	
22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL  ACSC/EDCC Maxwell AFB AL 36112-5542				22b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code) (205) 293-2483	22c. OFFICE SYMBOL

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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About the Author.....	iii
CHAPTER ONE--INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO--VO NGUYEN GIAP.....	2
CHAPTER THREE--WHY DIEN BIEN PHU?.....	4
CHAPTER FOUR--THE SIEGE OF DIEN BIEN PHU.....	7
The First Phase.....	7
The Second Phase.....	8
The Third Phase.....	9
The Fourth Phase.....	10
Reasons for Failure.....	10
CHAPTER FIVE--WHY KHE SANH?.....	13
CHAPTER SIX--THE SIEGE OF KHE SANH.....	15
Niagara.....	16
Airlift.....	16
Pegasus.....	17
United States' Public Reaction.....	17
Reasons for Success.....	18
CHAPTER SEVEN--RECOMMENDATIONS.....	20
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	22

## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

There have been many sieges that have lasted longer than those at Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh. The Germans held Stalingrad for 76 days and the British held Tobruk for 241 days. The longest siege of World War II took place at Lorient in France where the Germans were under siege for 270 days. Many sieges have involved larger numbers of troops on both sides. At Stalingrad over 1,000,000 Soviet troops encircled 300,000 German troops. (3:ii) The sieges at Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh involved only a fraction of these numbers. At Dien Bien Phu 13,000 French troops were encircled by 50,000 Vietminh, while at Khe Sanh 6,000 United States' troops defended against 30,000 North Vietnamese. (3:vii; 12:265) Numbers alone, however, do not signify the impact these two sieges have had on the history of Vietnam since 1953.

The defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu marked the end of French influence in the region. It is highly probable the United States would have been faced with much the same situation as the French after the fall of Dien Bien Phu if the North Vietnamese had been successful at Khe Sanh. The American people would have demanded, as the French people had in 1953, an end to the conflict. The purpose of this paper is to analyze these two sieges in an attempt to see why the French failed and the United States was successful and to make recommendations concerning future sieges.

The starting point in this analysis will be a description of General Vo Nguyen Giap. General Giap is important because he was the Vietminh commander at Dien Bien Phu and the North Vietnamese commander at Khe Sanh. (23:18) Chapter Three will consist of an explanation of why the siege of Dien Bien Phu took place. Chapter Four will describe the siege and give reasons for the French failure. Chapters Five and Six follow the same format in showing why the United States was successful at Khe Sanh. The final chapter consists of recommendations from lessons learned from both sieges.

## Chapter Two

### VO NGUYEN GIAP

The purpose of this section is to gain an insight into the man who was the opposition commander of the French at Dien Bien Phu and the United States at Khe Sanh. Vo Nguyen Giap was a general, schooled in formal military tactics and particularly guerrilla warfare. It is impossible to dissociate Vietnamese Communism from him. For over 30 years he was the faithful follower of Ho Chi Minh. If Ho Chi Minh gave the movement its ideology, Giap gave it the military apparatus to make the Vietnam People's Army the strongest native military force in Southeast Asia. (9:x-xxix) An understanding of the man, Giap, is essential to any study of Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh.

Giap was born in 1912 in the village of An-Xa in Quang Binh Province, one of Vietnam's poorest areas, located just north of the dividing line between North and South Vietnam. His father was a scholar and a member of a revolutionary nationalist group that had participated in anti-French activities. His hate of the French was transferred to his son. (9:xxix)

Even though he hated the French, Giap did not initially train as a professional soldier but studied law at the University of Hanoi and taught history to support his education. It was while attending the University of Hanoi that Giap joined the Indo-Chinese Communist Party. He became a confirmed Marxist and Vietnamese nationalist. (9:xxx)

Because of this Giap was forced to take refuge in China during World War II. When he returned from China, Giap was recognized as one of the best organizers in the Vietnamese Communist Movement. (9:xxxiii) This reputation resulted in his being chosen by Ho Chi Minh to organize the communist military force inside Vietnam. The August Revolution of 1945 was the first major success of Giap's forces and the initial test of the tactics Giap had learned under Mao Tse-Tung while in China. (7:9) He later described these tactics in an article published in Rangoon on 14 April 1950:

Mobile warfare is characterized by big concentrations of troops of the central units, supported by local military formation and militiamen, who agree on



uniting their force for one fixed battle. After which they should disperse immediately in order to avoid being followed by the enemy. The victorious outcome of the battle must in most cases be guaranteed beforehand. With the adoption of mobile tactics, the need for close cooperation between the troops and the civilians is now more transparent than ever before. The people must give a helpful hand to the troops in the repair of roads and in the transport of food and eventually of war booties. In order to save time and labor and to avoid superfluous transport of supplies, the people are also asked to build up local reservoirs of padi and cereals and, as a prerequisite to this, to take part in the nationwide grow more food campaign. The people can help the Army in other activities, too, such as intelligence and liaison, and with militia units which are formed by civilians occasionally fighting alongside the Regular Army. The phrase 'people's war' assumes its full meaning with this picture now being drawn in Vietnam both by the Army and the ordinary citizen of the Democratic Republic. The first battle fought along the lines of mobile warfare has been crowned with complete success. Undoubtedly the days to come will record more resounding victories which will lead to the final triumph of the forces of freedom over colonialism and servitude. (15:356)

The tactics described in this article, having been proven during the August Revolution of 1945, became the cornerstone of strategy and tactics used by the North Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sann.

## Chapter Three

### WHY DIEN BIEN PHU?

To fully understand why the Battle of Dien Bien Phu took place, you must have an understanding of the events leading up to the battle. At the end of 1949 the war was purely a guerilla war. The Vietminh forces were scattered indiscriminately over a thousand miles and lacked a main striking force. (15:364) The Chinese Communist arrival on the Kerangsi border in late 1949 provided the Vietminh with outside bases and a source of supply. This enabled them to establish the Vietnam People's Army (VPA). The heart of the VPA was the Main Battle Force, which was organized for conventional operations and consisted of five large divisions. These divisions were weak in firepower and poorly trained. (24:1)

The French at this time were concentrated in the Red River Delta around Hanoi. The Vietminh controlled everything to the north of Hanoi except a series of French posts guarding the Tonghing-China border. The first use of the Main Battle Force was to attack these forts. Giap was successful in completely routing the French forces. (15:365) This success spurred Giap to undertake an attack of Hanoi in January 1951, but his forces were no match for the French firepower. In the next four months Giap attacked Hanoi two more times with the same results--devastation of his forces. (9:xxxvii) Both sides developed strategies based upon the lessons learned from Giap's attacks of Hanoi.

The French victory had an unfortunate result. It led French officers to believe they could beat the Vietminh in a set piece battle anywhere. This philosophy became so pronounced that the dominant French strategical theme was centered around drawing the Vietminh into such a battle. (15:365) Giap, however, recognized that his lightly equipped and semi-trained divisions were no match for French firepower. He, therefore, reverted to guerilla warfare, employing irregular forces against enemy strength and his Main Battle Forces against enemy weakness. He would commit his forces only where there was a high assurance of success. (24:3) In the summer of 1953 each adversary developed battle plans based upon their respective strategies.

Giap's plan provided for operations to cause the French to disperse their forces so that (1) the Main Battle Force might isolate and destroy a major French force, and (2) the Delta might be so weakened that it could be taken. (24:4) The French commander at this time was General Henry Navarre. (6:30)

When General Navarre took command of the French forces in the Far East on 28 May 1953, he found a situation that could best be described as a stalemate. (6:30) At that time General Navarre estimated that he was facing a force of 125,000 troops organized into 6 divisions, 6 independent regiments, and a few battalions. (11:195) His forces consisted of 178,000 of which 30,000 were locally enlisted Vietnamese serving with the French. In addition, he inherited a nationalistic Vietnamese Army of 200,000 troops. (5:128) His initial estimate was that his forces could break the organized body of Communist aggression by the end of 1955. (6:31) His program to accomplish this was called the Navarre Plan.

The Navarre Plan entailed a shift from defensive to offensive operations. According to Colonel Revol, General Navarre's Chief of Cabinet, the Navarre Plan was to endow the French battle corps "with a mobility and an aggressiveness which it lacks." (6:31) There would be increased guerrilla warfare against the Vietminh. To accomplish this several Groupes Commandos Mixtes, or Mixed Native Commando Groups, made up of French trained Thai tribesmen and French cadres, began to operate behind enemy lines. (6:33) Initially, these forces were used to put pressure upon the enemy's rear areas using methods similar to the Communist guerrillas. They were too weak to influence the outcome of any major operations but did prove valuable for long range reconnaissance. It became clear to the French that the two main objectives of the Navarre Plan, destruction of the enemy's main battle force and the liquidation of the guerrilla threat behind French lines, could not be accomplished without a change of strategy. (6:33) As a result, operation Seagull was launched on 14 October 1953 in an attempt to lure Giap's Main Battle Forces into combat. (4:90)

Under the personal supervision of General Navarre the offensive was launched into enemy held territory in the delta region south of Hanoi. Six Groupes Mobiles, reinforced by tank and amphibious battalions, and two French Marine units used a pincer movement to encircle the VPA's 320th Infantry Division. Contrary to the French hopes, General Giap did not let himself be goaded to commit the mass of his Main Battle Force to save the division. The French won the battle but failed in their primary objective. Having failed to force Giap to fight on terrain not of his own choosing, all that remained was for

General Navarre to seek out the enemy in his own area. (6:34)  
A message received on 28 November 1953 brought about a decision  
as to this area. (11:206)

The message contained information concerning a large movement of supplies and troops by the Vietminh enroute toward Laos. Laos had gained increased importance with its signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty with France in October of 1953. To interdict the flow of supplies and troops, General Navarre chose Dien Bien Phu as a base of operations. Dien Bien Phu had certain strategic advantages. First, a strong French base would restrict Vietminh movement into Northern Laos. (4:111) Second, it could serve as a strong base for commando raids behind Vietminh lines. (15:367) Third, it could strangle supply flows from China. (4:111) Finally, it might draw Giap's units from the Red River Delta. (15:367)

On 20 November 1953 the French initiated Operation Castor, the airborne assault and seizure of Dien Bien Phu. (4:1) Giap reacted with the dispatch of four divisions to counter the French. (24:6) This sets the stage for the siege of Dien Bien Phu.

## Chapter Four

### THE SIEGE OF DIEN BIEN PHU

A small number of French troops were already garrisoned at Dien Bien Phu. These troops were reinforced by an airborne operation, Castor, beginning on 20 November 1953. (4:1) The French troops were dispersed in five camps in the valley around Dien Bien Phu: (1) Isabelle, (2) Gabrielle, (3) Beatrice, (4) Hugerette, and (5) Claudine. (19:159-161) We now come to the siege and fall of Dien Bien Phu. This will be divided into four phases: (1) the initial attack on the 13th of March, (2) the second main attack on the 30th of March, (3) the period of encroachment, and (4) the final attack.

#### THE FIRST PHASE

Concerning the first phase, the 308th Division of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) was returning to Dien Bien Phu from Laos during the first week of March. As the division advanced the troops dug in. On the 11th there was an engagement between the defenders and two Vietminh units that had penetrated the outer perimeter of French defenses. The French were successful in repulsing this attack. Later that day, French aircraft dropped napalm on Vietminh gun emplacements. It quickly became apparent to the French that the Vietminh had a surprisingly large number of 37mm anti-aircraft guns and field guns. Reconnaissance flights confirmed a large volume of supplies coming into the area from the Chinese border. The 12th was a relatively quiet day with action confined to shelling by both sides. (19:165) On the 13th the Vietminh launched the initial attack. Mass infantry attacks under the cover of intense artillery moved against Gabrielle and Beatrice. At the same time, there were harassing attacks against the other French positions to keep them out of the main battle. (18:22)

The Vietminh were successful in accomplishing this. The fighting around Beatrice was particularly fierce. The Vietminh attacked this position five separate times and by 10 o'clock had overrun the outer defenses of the position. The fifth attack was launched from these defeated areas, and the Vietminh

succeeded in completely overrunning the French. (3:134-141)  
The French defenders at Gabrielle did not fair much better.  
(19:165)

The first attack on Gabrielle was repulsed after which the Vietminh fell back and regrouped. Sporadic fighting on the remainder of the 13th and the day of the 14th followed. On the evening of the 14th, heavy artillery fire initiated the second main assault of Gabrielle. Desparate fighting took place the entire night. The Vietminh succeeded in taking some French positions but failed in achieving a complete victory. (3:142-147) A French counterattack was launched on the 15th. (3:150)

The mission of the counterattack was to reinforce Gabrielle, but the French found it so badly battered that it was abandoned. As the French retreated, the Vietminh moved into Gabrielle. While the Vietminh consolidated their gains, artillery continued to fire from the hills around Dien Bien Phu on the other French positions. (3:151-152)

French aircraft attacked the artillery positions but had little success and sustained heavy losses. These losses were largely due to the unforeseen presence of so many anti-aircraft guns. Twelve French aircraft were destroyed between the 11th and 15th of March alone. The 15th marks the end of the first phase. (19:166)

During the first phase Beatrice and Gabrielle fell to the Vietminh. The Vietminh had closed in around the French to within a mile of the current French positions. Even with these losses the French were still generally optimistic. (3:160) They felt the Vietminh frontal attacks had resulted in heavy losses. The opinion was General Giap would think twice before initiating another such attack. (19:167)

### THE SECOND PHASE

At first, it seemed the French assessment had been accurate. While the Vietminh regrouped to the north and east, another French paratrooper battalion was dropped into Dien Bien Phu. No major enemy attacks took place, but the Vietminh were busy in other ways. Shelling of the airfield became so intense that the French had to stop using it, and as a result all supplies and troops had to be dropped in. (18:22) The Vietminh were slowly, but steadily, moving toward the French positions by digging trenches. (18:23) By late March the Vietminh had been successful in all but closing the runway and moving to positions within a half mile of the French in many locations. The French were also busy. (16:52-53)

The French air attacks were intensified. An intensive air campaign was mounted in an attempt to neutralize the Vietminh anti-aircraft and artillery. On one day over 10,000 gallons of napalm were dropped on Vietminh positions. On the 28th the French attacked an enemy position that had been dominating the airfield. This attack was successful in capturing the enemy anti-aircraft guns. The French still felt Giap would not risk another mass frontal attack and small engagements such as this would be the rule. (16:54)

On the 30th of March Giap proved this assumption to be false. During the early morning the Vietminh launched a large infantry attack taking full advantage of the trenches they had dug. On the 1st of April the Vietminh were successful in taking control of a portion of the airstrip. During the night the Vietminh attacked Isabelle, but the French broke up the attack with accurate artillery fire. The French counterattacked and regained much of the lost ground but were not able to drive the enemy from the airstrip. (9:171) This ended the second phase.

During the second phase Giap had concentrated mainly on the area around the airstrip. A continuous pattern of mass infantry attacks by the Vietminh followed by French counterattacks was seen throughout the phase. The French counterattacks were vigorous and aggressive, but the sheer weight of numbers was against them. The Vietminh had succeeded in penetrating French defenses and neutralizing the airfield. (9:172) A period of encroachment followed that was the main strategy of the third phase.

### THE THIRD PHASE

At the beginning of the third phase, a few quiet days passed. The French used these days to repair and reorganize their positions. On the 7th of May another paratrooper battalion was airdropped into the garrison. The subsequent two weeks were marked by numerous attacks and counterattacks. The results were the French abandoning the airfield entirely and withdrawing to positions around Isabelle. It was no longer possible to drop in troops, and supplies were parachuted in with difficulty. The Vietminh continued digging trenches and were now within 800 yards of the French Command Post. (16:57)

No large scale actions took place during the third phase. It was marked by a steady Vietminh encroachment of the remaining French positions. Rains had restricted French air activity and turned the battlefield into a sea of mud. (21:44) General Navarre had hoped the rain would wash out the Vietminh supply routes and curtail the flow of enemy ammunition. This he hoped

would allow the reopening of the runway, but this did not occur. It became evident the French prospects were not good. At this time General Giap was considering two alternative courses of action. (19:174)

The first called for a continuation of his "nibbling" tactics, while the other was to launch another mass attack. He chose the latter, and the fourth phase is the final Vietminh attack on the French. (19:174)

#### THE FOURTH PHASE

The fourth phase began on the 1st of May with the Vietminh attacking in mass. The usual artillery barrage did not take place because the Vietminh were so close to the French. Much of the fighting was done with bayonet and hand grenades. In spite of French counterattacks, the Vietminh were successful in overrunning part of the forward defense of Isabelle. (19:175)

During the next days mass infantry attacks alternated with heavy mortar fire attacking French positions. The Vietminh gained ground through sheer weight of numbers. The French fought determinedly, but forward defense locations were lost one by one. (19:175) By sunrise on the 7th of May, the Vietminh had reached within 100 yards of the French Command Post. By this time all the French artillery had been knocked out, and ammunition was dangerously low. At 11:00 AM Brigadier de Castries, the Commander, sent a wireless report stating, "They are a few hundred meters away. They have broken through everywhere." At 1:50 AM on the 8th of May, Isabelle fell and with it the French at Dien Bien Phu. (19:176) The majority of the French forces were still in tack, but the people of France lost the will to support the conflict with the loss of this battle. There were many reasons for the French failure. The following paragraphs will highlight the major ones.

#### REASONS FOR FAILURE

The French grossly underestimated Vietminh capabilities in three main areas. First, General Navarre and his staff did not believe the Vietminh could mass more than one division at Dien Bien Phu. Second, the French did not believe the Vietminh had the logistics capacity to supply their troops. Finally, the French intelligence estimate of Vietminh artillery pieces and artillery shells was extremely low. The French compounded these errors by overestimating French Air Force capabilities.



The concentration of four Vietminh divisions at Dien Bien Phu was regarded by the French as a "utopian project". (13:17) The French had calculated on the basis of Western military doctrine that the enemy simply did not have the logistics capabilities to supply and maintain such a force so far from its bases. General Navarre believed he would be faced with only one division. (13:18) This assumption did not take into consideration General Giap's patience and determination. Taking their time, the Vietminh continued their buildup until four infantry divisions and one artillery division were in place before attacking. General Giap solved the logistics problems by enlisting the entire Vietnamese population. General Giap stated, "The French could never appreciate the strength of a nation, of a people. This strength is immense. It can overcome any difficulty, defeat any enemy." (9:183)

General Giap described the operation in People's War, People's Army. The Vietnamese people under the direct leadership of the committees of supply for the front gave proof of great heroism and endurance in serving the front. Thousands of bicycles from the towns carried food and munitions to the front. Truck convoys valiantly crossed streams, mountains, and forests to bring food and ammunition to the Army. Day and night, hundreds of thousands of porters and young volunteers crossed passes and forded rivers in spite of enemy planes and delayed action bombs. This is the way General Giap solved the problems of supply to the front. (9:184) The French also failed in accurately assessing the Vietminh artillery capabilities.

French intelligence credited General Giap with 40 to 60 medium howitzers capable of firing 25,000 rounds. This estimate was based on Giap's attack of Na-San two years earlier and did not credit any improvement. The French defenses were predicated upon these estimates. (15:367) The Vietminh capabilities, however, far exceeded this. In reality there were 144 field pieces, not including thirty 75mm recoilless cannon, and some 36 heavy flak pieces. A more fateful error occurred in intelligence estimates of artillery ammunition capability. The 25,000 rounds estimated turned into a reality of 102,000 shells of 75mm caliber or larger. (15:451) The French compounded these errors by overestimating their capabilities in the air.

French domination of the air over Indo-China was all promise, but no achievement. Tactical air support was almost absent at Dien Bien Phu. There were too few aircraft and even these were of poor vintage. The idea of placing on aircraft the onus of breaking a stranglehold such as was maintained by the Vietminh was a misconception of the capability of tactical aircraft with conventional armament. (16:60) Using air for resupply was a failure. There were not enough transport aircraft available. Dien Bien Phu needed 400 tons of supplies a day to survive.

During the siege an average of 120 tons per day were delivered by airdrop. Of this, over 20 tons per day fell into enemy hands. (24:11)

This concludes the analysis of the siege of Dien Bien Phu and the reasons why the French were not successful. The next section will set the stage for the siege of Khe Sanh.

## Chapter Five

### WHY KHE SANH?

North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap was confident the tactics he employed at Dien Bien Phu 14 years earlier would work again at Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh is ringed with mountains where Giap could dig in his artillery much as he had done at Dien Bien Phu. After softening Khe Sanh with artillery, Giap felt his human wave tactics would be successful in overrunning the outpost. When the Joint Chiefs of Staff solemnly declared to President Johnson that Khe Sanh would be held, Giap knew by taking it he might seriously undermine the already precarious level of US support for administration policies in Vietnam. If he could precipitate a US pullout by taking Khe Sanh, he would clear the way for a swift Communist takeover of South Vietnam. (12:90) The US position for wanting to maintain Khe Sanh was centered around three areas.

First, militarily it had a strategic location. It is located in the northwest corner of South Vietnam in close proximity to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), Laos, and the major North Vietnamese supply routes to South Vietnam and Laos. (1:194) Khe Sanh could serve as a patrol base for blocking enemy infiltration from Laos, an airstrip for reconnaissance planes surveying the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a western anchor for defenses south of the DMZ, and an eventual jump-off point for ground operations to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. (12:40; 10:539) Khe Sanh was, secondly, seen as bait to entice the Vietminh to enter a large scale battle.

American commanders found it almost impossible to make the enemy stand still long enough to be destroyed by supporting arms. "The Vietcong," General Westmoreland conceded, "are uncommonly adept at slithering away." (12:63) The best place to find large concentrations of enemy forces, Westmoreland decided, was in the jungled mountains in the heart of enemy based areas. The place he decided on was Khe Sanh. (12:64) The final reason for Khe Sanh was for it to serve as a capstone of General Westmoreland's combat career.

General Westmoreland knew he would be leaving Vietnam in the summer of 1968. Khe Sanh would be the single, dramatic

blow that would cripple the North Vietnamese beyond any doubt. It would be the definite victory, the perfect finishing touch for his tour in Vietnam. (12:36)

This sets the stage for the siege of Khe Sanh. The siege was declared on 20 January 1968 and lasted until 8 April 1968. (23:107-109) It pitted 6,000 US Marines and South Vietnamese Rangers against an enemy force roughly five times as large. (23:iii) Even with this great numerical advantage, the human wave tactics that Giap intended to use never took place. The next section will explain why and show the significance of air power in the siege of Khe Sanh.

## Chapter Six

### THE SIEGE OF KHE SANH

The siege of Khe Sanh will be looked at in four different areas. The areas will be intelligence, ground operations, air operations, and United States' public reaction. Major emphasis will be placed on air operations because of its major significance in the outcome of the siege. Intelligence support was good before and during the siege.

The main reason for this was the defection of First Lieutenant La Than Tonc, a North Vietnamese artillery officer, on the 20th of January. His interrogation confirmed and reinforced previous beliefs. For 14 years Tonc had served in an army at war. He had constantly distinguished himself in battle, but his superiors had chosen an officer junior to him for promotion to captain. Bitterly disappointed, he had decided to defect. (12:108-109) His information turned out to be a detailed description of the forthcoming Communist offensive. The defector described in detail the assembly areas and attack routes of two regiments of the 325th Division. He gave the battle plan of the 304th Division, especially its role in the attack on Khe Sanh. The 320th Division was poised to attack Camp Carroll to silence the big guns that supported Khe Sanh. The first enemy assaults would begin precisely at 0030 on 21 January. The plan was to quickly overrun Khe Sanh and move on to Quang Tri and Hue. (12:108-110) Armed with this intelligence the US forces made final preparations for the battle. At exactly 30 minutes past midnight, North Vietnamese gunners fired on Khe Sanh. (12:113)

Mortar bombardment was followed by enemy sappers trying to blast passages through the barbed wire perimeter for the infantry to pass through. The initial attackers were contained and killed. The Vietcong resumed the attack at 0530 with mortar and artillery fire. The barrage started numerous fires and caused an explosion in the main ammunition dump, but the Marines were again successful in negating the attack. (23:23-25) The shelling of Khe Sanh continued throughout the siege, but the large scale battle never took place. The remainder of this chapter will focus on specific operations that took place during the siege. The operations to be covered are Niagara, Airlift, and Pegasus.

## NIAGARA

Operation Niagara was divided into parts I and II. Niagara I was an extensive reconnaissance program to obtain as much information as possible about the enemy. All sources available including aircraft, sensors, and reconnaissance teams were used. The fire-power phase, Niagara II, was initiated in mid-January and lasted until late March. (25:163) The bombardment continued day and night.

Involved in this application of airpower were units from the Air Force, Marines, and Navy. Aircraft used included F-4s, F-100s, A-4s, B-57s, A-1s, and B-52s. The heart of the operation was the use of the B-52s. The B-52s dropped bombs within 100 yards of the Marine's outside defense perimeter. They flew in cells of three with each aircraft carrying approximately one hundred 500 pound bombs. Total strike sorties averaged 330 a day, and nearly 200,000 tons of bombs were dropped by the B-52s and the fighter-bombers during the siege in an area of approximately five square miles. (22:22-27) Airlift was another major achievement.

## AIRLIFT

C-130s and C-123s combined to fly 668 airdrop and 460 air-land sorties. This accounted for 12,430 tons of supplies for Khe Sanh. (17:5) This tonage, plus supplies flown in by Army and Marine helicopters, assured Khe Sanh of needed supplies. (12:222) The actual resupply task was a difficult and dangerous one.

The transport crews could usually count on several things happening during a mission. First, there was almost always an instrument descent through cloud cover with a 600 foot ceiling. Sometimes there would be a rapid climb back up because of heavy mortar fire. The ground time was kept to a minimum. From touchdown to takeoff averaged three minutes and sometimes that was too long. (22:27) The Vietcong had every inch of the runway zeroed in, and when an airplane tried to land the enemy walked artillery rounds up the center line. (14:48) Enemy fire became so intense that airdrop became the primary means of resupply after the 1st of February. (17:4) Nearly every aircraft that flew over Khe Sanh was shot at. About a fourth were hit, but despite the hostile fire and the bad weather the resupply was successful. (22:27) The successes of Operation Niagara and Airlift paved the way for Operation Pegasus on 1 April. (23:96)

## PEGASUS

More than 30,000 men would be involved in the relief operation, Pegasus, of Khe Sanh. (12:240) Pegasus entailed the reopening of Highway 9 into Khe Sanh and offensive air operations in the vicinity of Khe Sanh. Ca Lu was chosen as the jumping-off point for the relief forces. (23:93)

Two United States' Marine battalions had already secured the road to Ca Lu, clearing the way for convoys of resupply. Three battalions of engineers were leveling ground for a new airfield, building parking ramps, digging artillery pits, and bunker complexes for a powerful forward base. From Ca Lu to Khe Sanh was only 12 miles. (12:241)

Nothing was left to chance. Heavy bombing would soften up enemy positions, then the Air Cavalry would surprise enemy defenders with vertical envelopment tactics. (12:241) On 1 April two infantry battalions advanced along Route 9 screening the engineers who repaired the cratered highway. (23:99) The 3rd Republic of Vietnam Airborne Task Force followed the United States' troops. This point of the operations was coordinated with the first offensive operation of the Marines at Khe Sanh since the start of the siege. (12:241)

On 8 April the relief forces arrived at Khe Sanh. This marked the official end to the siege that had lasted 80 days. During that time Khe Sanh was under constant fire, but the human wave infantry attacks never took place.

## UNITED STATES' PUBLIC REACTION

Many historians believe a defeat at Khe Sanh would have had the same affect on the United States' policy in Indo-China as the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. They base this belief on social and political factors in the United States in the late 1960s. Factors that became so significant that President Johnson told the nation he was stopping the bombing of North Vietnam, he was ready to bring the war to an end, and he would not seek reelection for another term. (12:242) This statement was made approximately one week before the siege of Khe Sanh ended.

Prior to this General Westmoreland had told an audience of news correspondents,

The only reason the Vietcong continue to fight is the delusion that political pressure in the United

States combined with a tactical defeat of a major American unit might force the United States to withdrawal. (12:76)

Political pressure from the United States was strong. On October 31, 1967 Robert McNamara, Defense Secretary, resigned telling President Johnson the Vietnamese War was dangerous, costly, and unsatisfactory to our people. American casualties had risen from 2,500 in 1965, to 33,000 in 1966, to 80,000 in 1967. (12:76) The will to support the war was waning. Anything that even resembled a defeat at Khe Sanh would have had the same results as Dien Bien Phu.

### REASONS FOR SUCCESS

There were three main reasons for the United States' success at Khe Sanh. First, the forces at Khe Sanh had knowledge of the Vietcong plans before the siege began. This knowledge was gained through intelligence efforts that were reinforced and augmented through the interrogation of a North Vietnamese defector. Second, offensive air power was successful in deterring any major attack by the enemy. Third, the United States was able to resupply Khe Sanh by air. A summary of each of these areas will follow starting with intelligence.

American commanders realized the importance of knowledge of enemy plans. Niagara I was an extensive reconnaissance program implemented to gain as much information about the enemy as possible. This information pointed to an attack on Khe Sanh by a large number of North Vietnamese forces. (25:163) This was confirmed by the interrogation of a North Vietnamese defector, Lieutenant La Than Tonc. The defector's revelations were so extraordinary the Marines doubted him at first. Luckily, the Marines decided they had nothing to lose in believing him. The information turned out to be a description of the entire forthcoming Communist offensive. (12:108-110) With this information Niagara II was initiated.

Niagara II was the offensive air operation that took place in support of Khe Sanh. The Air Force made 9,691 fighter-bomber attacks at Khe Sanh, the Marines 7,078, and the Navy 5,337. These airplanes delivered 39,178 tons of bombs, rockets, and napalm. (12:246) "The key to success," Westmoreland asserted, "was the tremendous tonage of bombs dropped by B-52s." (12:247) The B-52s dropped 75,000 tons in 2,602 sorties. (22:25) Under this intense air attack the enemy was never able to use the mass infantry attacks it had planned. Even though the Vietcong



were not successful in initiating a mass infantry attack, they were successful in encircling Khe Sanh. The only means of resupply became by air.

The United States' forces were successful in resupplying Khe Sanh by air. Air Force transports accounted for 12,430 tons of supplies for Khe Sanh. This was augmented by supplies flown in by the Army and Marine helicopters. The resupply task was difficult and dangerous but a prerequisite for survival of the Marines at Khe Sanh. (12:222)

These three factors for success at Khe Sanh all have one thing in common. The French at Dien Bien Phu failed at all three. The next chapter will list recommendations for surviving a siege based upon lessons learned from Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh.

## Chapter Seven

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The sieges of Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh had many common aspects. They both took place in Indo-China. The forces under siege had a common enemy, the Communist North Vietnamese. The Commander of the North Vietnamese forces was in both cases Vo Nguyen Giap. The French and Americans invited attack in order to draw Giap's forces into battle. As has been seen, these many similarities led to very different outcomes. The following questions and their answers help explain why.

1. Did the forces under siege have good intelligence on enemy strengths and intentions?

French - No      United States - Yes

2. Was offensive air support a factor in negating operations by the enemy?

French - No      United States - Yes

3. Was resupply by air successful?

French - No      United States - Yes

Three recommendations for electing to hold territory under siege can be supported from these questions and answers.

First, you must know your enemy's capabilities and intentions. An intensive intelligence gathering effort is a must in determining if success is possible. The French failed to do this. In preparing for the siege they grossly underestimated the Vietminh troop strength and the Vietminh ability to resupply their troops at Dien Bien Phu. The French also planned their defenses upon projected enemy artillery capabilities based upon data from an engagement that occurred two years earlier. The data was not accurate and the defenses proved inadequate. The United States did not make these mistakes. Prior to the siege at Khe Sanh an intensive intelligence gathering operation, Niagara I, took place. As a result North Vietnamese troop strengths and intentions were known prior to the siege. Therefore, United States' preparations and assessments were based upon accurate

information, which greatly aided the defense of Khe Sanh. This emphasizes the need to know your enemy's strengths and intentions.

Second, in deciding to hold territory significant air resources should be available for offensive air support. The French used what offensive air support was available to them, but it was not enough. They did not have the air assets available to impair the Vietminh efforts. The United States flew a 24 hour-a-day bombing operation, Niagara II, in support of Khe Sanh. Because of this the North Vietnamese were never able to gain momentum for a full scale attack.

Third, you must have the ability to resupply your troops in the worst possible situation. The French did not have this ability. They found themselves in a situation in which all supplies had to be airdropped. They had not foreseen this requirement and were unable to meet it. The United States found themselves in much the same circumstances at Khe Sanh but had the ability to meet resupply requirements.

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